Washington, DC – Rep. Mike Honda (D-CA), Ranking Democrat on the Energy Subcommittee of the U.S. House Committee on Science today questioned the economic rationality of domestic nuclear fuel reprocessing technologies as well as the impact of reprocessing on energy efficiency, nuclear waste management and weapons proliferation. Honda's doubts were raised during the Energy Subcommittee's examination of the Bush Administration's proposed Global Nuclear Energy Partnership (GNEP) program.

"What troubles me about the GNEP proposal is the haste with which it has been developed," said Honda, "and that a closed circle of people have made all of the key decisions without much input from industry or the scientific community."

Witnesses before the Subcommittee represented a range of viewpoints, several raising similar doubts.

Massachusetts Institute of Technology nuclear and mechanical engineering professor Neil Todreas testified: “Serious decisions remain unresolved about [GNEP’s] pace, including technical readiness, facility processes and scale, and the consequences of redirecting most of the available funding for nuclear energy to this effort.”

Dr. Richard Garwin, IBM Fellow Emeritus at the Thomas J. Watson Research Center, testified that, “Many of GNEP’s goals and timelines are just unrealistic.

Such an enduring program ought to be considered in light of long-term budgets

rather than near-year expenditures.”

Garwin echoed Rep. Honda’s assessment that Administration decisions have been made before essential research has been completed. “GNEP R&D priorities are simply insufficient to make decisions across a wide range of critical areas – from reactor cooling methods to which

fuels will power fast-neutron reactors," he said, concluding, "GNEP is an unnecessarily expensive, hastily formulated program, not the deliberative, transparent process critical for success."

Likening the GNEP decision-making process to

President Bush’s Iraq war planning, Rep. Honda noted, “The Administration’s policy decisions have already been made by a closed White House club, ignoring critical facts and shunning outside expert input,” he said. “They first make decisions, and then tailor convenient justifications for sale to Congress.”

In conclusion, Honda voiced concern about the Department of Energy's (DOE) openness to external advice, noting that reports about the "disbanding of the Secretary of Energy's

Advisory Board – which was chartered to provide the Secretary with timely, balanced external advice – only reinforce the impression that outside input is unwelcome on major programs such as GNEP that are critical to America's economy and national security."

The full text of Ranking Member Honda's statement is included below:

Opening Statement of Rep. Mike Honda

Ranking Member, Subcommittee on Energy, Committee on Science

April 6, 2006 Hearing on the proposed Global Nuclear Energy Partnership

I thank Chairwoman Biggert for

holding this hearing today so that we can learn more about the Global Nuclear Energy

Partnership, which President Bush announced without providing much detail in

February with his budget request.

As we all know, currently the United States does not reprocess nuclear spent fuel because of

concerns about the proliferation of nuclear weapons material.

In addition, reprocessing is not cost

effective, since uranium supplies around the world are plentiful and can be

fabricated into fuel at far lest cost than reprocessing spent fuel.
The

economics of this situation have not changed and are not going to change for a long time.

Which brings us to the real reason that

the Bush Administration is putting forward a nuclear fuel reprocessing

program – the problem of dealing with nuclear waste.

The politics of Yucca

Mountain have made it clear that siting and licensing a second

waste repository is highly unlikely. At this point, it

still isn't clear how things are going to proceed with Yucca Mountain.

The Bush Administratio

n has seized upon this political situation to justify reprocessing

of spent fuel to reduce the heat of the material that would potentially

be put in Yucca Mountain in order to expand the capacity of

the proposed repository.

Yesterday the Administration sent a legislative proposal to

Congress to expedite the repository which would lift the current

statutory limit on the amount of waste that could be stored there.

Such a move is essential to justifying developing

a reprocessing program.

What troubles me

about this whole Global Nuclear Energy

Partnership proposal is the haste with which it seems to

have been developed and the fact that a very small

number of people seem to have made all of the

key decisions without much input from

industry or the scientific community.

For

example, it appears that the technology for

reprocessing spent fuel, UREX+, has already

been selected by the advocates for the

program.
While the final decision

hasn’t been made, it seems that the decision

has essentially been made to use metal fuel,

which would require the constructio n of a

pyroproces sing plant for each fast reactor that will be

used to convert reprocessed fuel into electricity.

What isn’t

clear to me is who made these decisions,

what process was used to make those

decisions, or even why they have already

been made, given the premature stage of

the technologies and huge uncertainty as to

whether they will be successful and cost effective.

The spent

nuclear fuel we have now can safely be stored

in dry casks for 50 years or more, giving us

plenty of time to do more research, more fully

evaluate technology alternatives, and have

greater engagement from all interested parties in

the decision making process.

For a

program that may cost as much as hundreds

of billions of dollars in taxpayer money, it

seems that such study and scrutiny is the least

we can do to ensure that the best policy is what is

pursued.

From where I sit, the way that the Global

Nuclear Energy Partnership has been put

together and then proposed looks a lot like the

way in which the President took the nation to

war in Iraq.

The policy

decisions have already been made by

a small, isolated group within the Administr

ation without all of the facts and without

input from experts from outside their

group.

Once that decision was

made, then a justificatio n for it was

developed and sold to Congress.

A story posted on the website

of the scientific journal Nature

yesterday about the disbanding of the

Secretary of Energy's Advisory

Board, which was chartered

to provide the Secretary with

timely, balanced external advice on

issues of importanc e, only reinforces

the impression that outside

input is not welcome on major

programs such as GNEP.

But as with Iraq, there seem to

be major uncertain ties in GNEP,

uncertain ties in the technical feasibility

, the cost, and uncertainty in the

ability of the agency in charge to

successf ully carry out such a large

effort.

I don't believe that it is wise for

us to rush to judgment on GNEP

as we rushed to war, and I

certainly don't want to see the

kind of outcome that a rushed

decision and incomplete plan

are sure to deliver.

This decision doesn't need to

be made today, we have other

means for storing nuclear

waste temporarily while we wait

for all of the facts.

In closing, Madame Chairwo

man, I thank you again for

holding this hearing so that

we can try to get some answers

on how these decisions were

made,

we can

hear

some

outside thoughts on this proposal,

and

perhaps

hear

some

alternative options for dealing

with the problem.